# *Parents and Their Children's Education:*

## *Defining a Meaningful Role for School Advisory Councils*

A Discussion Paper
April 2003

*A Learning for Life Initiative*

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# Introduction

On September 24, 2002, the Minister of Education released *Learning for Life*, a multi-year plan to improve the quality of education in Nova Scotia. The plan has seven themes, including the valuable contribution that informed, involved parents can make in supporting their children's education.

School advisory councils, usually chaired by parents, give parents an opportunity to support their children's education and their schools. Since advisory council membership includes parents, school staff, community members, and students, the council brings a team approach to school improvement focused on student achievement.

In the fall of 2002, the Minister of Education met with representatives from school advisory councils and other parent organizations across the province. In some areas, the Minister heard that school advisory councils are working well and parents felt they are valued members of their councils. Other parents felt that they wanted a more effective voice on their councils and in the decision-making process in their schools. In some instances, training, information, and professional support are not always available to councils, creating uncertainty about their roles and limiting their effectiveness.

The Minister of Education wants to help ensure parents, and all advisory council members, have meaningful roles in decisions affecting the quality of education in their schools.

To guide the discussion concerning how to reach this goal, this paper is organized around three main topics:

1. Roles of the school advisory councils
2. Supports for school advisory councils
3. Other issues related to the effectiveness of the school advisory councils

# Topic One—Roles of School Advisory Councils

The opportunity to create school advisory councils was established in legislation in 1996 (see Appendix A—*Education Act* Excerpts). Since that time, advisory councils have been established or are in the process of being established in approximately 90 percent of Nova Scotia schools.

School advisory councils are intended to give parents, and all council members, meaningful roles in decisions and issues that contribute to the quality of education in their schools. Generally, parents and councils do not want to be involved in day-to-day school operations. Rather, they want to be well-informed and be able to influence the decisions that directly affect their children's learning.

Parents, and advisory councils have more information about student achievement and the quality of education through provincial, national, and international test results, and the annual *Minister's Report to Parents*.

The *Education Act* requires that school advisory councils

- in consultation with school staff, develop and recommend to the school board a school improvement plan, and prepare an annual report
- advise on the development of school policies that promote academic excellence and a positive learning environment
- advise the principal and school staff on **curriculum and programs**, **school practices**, **student discipline**, **fund-raising,** and parent–school communications
- advise the school board on **curriculum and programs**, **student-support services**, **policy development**, **funding,** and communications strategies
- participate in the selection of the principal by representation on the school board's selection committee

The *Education Act* also includes a general clause that allows advisory councils to assume additional roles, as defined in their letters of agreement with their school boards. All council responsibilities must be conducted in accordance with the *Education Act*, and provincial and school board policies.

## *Discussion Points*

- Which roles are carried out in your school advisory council?
- Do you feel these roles are appropriate for a school advisory council?
- What can be done to make the roles be more effective?
- Are there additional roles being carried out and are they appropriate?
- Should the mandate for school advisory councils be broadened? In what way?

# Topic Two—Support for School Advisory Councils

## Principals

Principals are the educational leaders in our schools. Principals also play a key role in supporting effective school advisory councils.

Principals are expected to encourage the establishment of advisory councils, and assist them in their work. Specifically, principals are expected to seek council advice on policies that promote academic excellence and a positive learning environment, curriculum and programs, school practices, student discipline, fund-raising, and parent-school communications.

Principals are responsible for ensuring that councils have the information and opportunities to give meaningful advice on these matters. In some cases, principals feel they have not been given adequate information or support in order to meet this responsibility.

As well, principals have many other responsibilities to fulfil, both during and outside of the school day. Effective school advisory councils understand the need for principals to balance the time they can devote to councils with their other educational responsibilities. Effective councils also understand that their role is advisory. While they deserve meaningful opportunity to provide input, the final decision on educational matters rests with the principal, teachers, and school staff.

## Other Supports

Effective school advisory councils receive a range of supports from the school board, the principal and other members of the school community. When school advisory councils were established, brochures, guides, and other information were developed, and training and networking conferences were held. School boards and the department assigned staff with responsibility for supporting school advisory council members. School boards have specific responsibilities under the *Education Act* to consult councils on curriculum and programs, student-support services, policy development, funding and communication plans. School boards must also ensure that councils have enough information and time to provide meaningful advice to the boards on these matters.

## Support Networks

School advisory councils must also consider ways to collaborate with each other and to participate more effectively in consultation. In some provinces, this is achieved through regional or provincial associations of advisory councils. This may support more effective communications if councils can collectively provide their advice to boards, through a regional or provincial association.

## *Discussion Points*

- Do members of school advisory councils understand their role?
- Are members receiving adequate training?
- Does the school advisory council have effective avenues to carry out their role?
- Does the principal understand, value, and support the role of school advisory councils?
- Does the staff understand, value, and support the role of school advisory councils?
- Is the school advisory council routinely provided with adequate and timely information from the principal to provide meaningful input?
- Does the school board understand, value, and support the role of school advisory councils?
- Is the school advisory council routinely provided with adequate and timely information from the school board to provide meaningful input?
- Does the Department of Education understand, value, and support the role of school advisory councils?
- Is the school advisory council routinely provided with adequate and timely information from the Department of Education to provide meaningful input?

# Topic Three—Other Issues Related to the Effectiveness of School Advisory Councils

## Division of Membership

The current membership selection process is defined in Section 21 of the *Education Act* (see Appendix A). The goal is to ensure a balanced representation of all partners in the school community. Each school advisory council requires a signed agreement which includes the composition of membership. Over time, as the school community changes, the original composition of the school advisory council may not fit its changing needs. Presently there is no expectation to periodically review school advisory councils' membership representation.

## Meaningful Voice

The Minister of Education wants to ensure that all advisory council members have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting the quality of education in their schools. The *Education Act* gives school advisory councils a role in hiring new principals. This is designed to give school advisory councils input and influence concerning the choice of education leaders for their schools.

Effective councils understand that their role is advisory. While they deserve a meaningful opportunity to provide input the final decision on educational matters rests with principals, teachers and school staff.

## Communications

In order to have an effective voice, school advisory councils need to have access to both relevant and timely information and to communicate effectively with all members of the school community. This communication may include formal and informal meetings, newsletters, phone calls, notice boards, community gatherings, and e-mails. Effective communication is a key factor for the school advisory councils' accountability.

## Accountability

The school improvement plan, required in all schools, is an important tool to support the quality of education and student achievement. The *Education Act* says that school advisory councils are responsible to annually develop and recommend school improvement plans to the school board.

In some places, the principal, teachers, and school staff have taken the responsibility to develop the school improvement plan, in consultation with the school advisory council. In other places, the school advisory council has been primarily responsible to develop the annual school improvement plan, in consultation with the principal, teachers, and school staff. Either way, the school improvement plan is an important accountability document.

Council members are not expected to have the time or expertise to do the kind of in-depth analysis that may be necessary to support the complete development of the school improvement plan. Should the council be responsible for advising on the plan, developing the plan, monitoring its implementation, or a combination of these roles?

## Diversity

Another commitment in *Learning for Life* is "to ensure the education system reflects the diverse nature of Nova Scotia communities." This must begin in our schools and include African Nova Scotians, Mi'kmaq, Acadians, Francophones, and persons with disabilities.

The current composition of councils allows considerable opportunity to bring more diversity to councils without adding to the overall membership. Recruitment efforts or additional designated members could be considered. However, as each school is unique, the best tool to ensure diversity may be a council's letter of agreement, rather than changes in provincial legislation that would not allow the flexibility to reflect diversity within individual communities.

## Relationship Between Advisory Councils and Other Parent Groups

Home and school, and parent-teacher associations have traditionally played an important role in Nova Scotia. However, their membership is generally not as broad as that of school advisory councils, which bring all members of the school community to the table. Home and school associations have many functions, including fund-raising which is not part of the school advisory council's role. There needs to be a cooperative relationship between school advisory councils, home and school, and parent-teacher associations for both groups to work effectively together. Ways to strengthen these relationships should be considered. One way could be a designated seat for a home and school representative on school advisory councils.

## *Discussion Points*

- Is the current division of membership among parents, students, teachers, support staff, community members, and the principal appropriate? Should it be periodically reviewed?
- Does the council have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting the school?
- Does the school council communicate effectively with the school community?
- Who should take the lead in the development of the school improvement plan?
- Should the council be responsible for advising on the plan, developing the plan, monitoring its implementation, or a combination of these roles?
- Do you believe your school's advisory council is representative of your school community? If not, what are the challenges?
- What steps can schools, school boards, the Department of Education, or other groups take to enhance diversity within school advisory councils?
- Would designating a school advisory council seat for a representative of a school's parent group add a greater parent voice to the council and support a more effective relationship?
- Should school advisory councils be mandatory in all schools?
- What are the other school advisory council issues you feel need to be discussed?

# Next Steps

The information gathered through this consultation process will be analysed and summarized in a report to inform decision-makers and stakeholders about key issues and concerns regarding the roles and operations of school advisory councils.

In late June 2003, focus group discussions will be scheduled within each school board. These focus groups will be looking at issues and suggestions arising from the response form with a view to developing solutions. School board members, school advisory council members, and major education stakeholder groups will have representation at these focus groups.

Following the results of the focus groups the Department of Education will review and consider all options to improve school advisory councils, which may include legislative amendments to the *Education Act*.

To conclude, the words of one Nova Scotia parent (who wrote upon hearing of the planned discussion paper) perhaps sum up the goal of this effort:

> ... School advisory councils have the extraordinary potential of developing bridges of communication among all partners in public education. It is essential that all partners work cooperatively. Together, we may learn our way out of the challenges the modern public education system now faces ... It is my hope that the SAC review panel will listen to the concerns of parents, learn from their experiences, and ensure SACs are restructured in such a way as to allow parents an equitable, meaningful and effective role in school advisory planning.

Thank you for your contribution to improving the effectiveness of school advisory councils in Nova Scotia schools.

# Appendix A—*Education Act* Excerpts*

**SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCILS**

**20 (1)** A school board shall establish a school advisory council for a public school where

(a) eight or more parents of students attending the public school;

(b) a home and school association, parent-teacher association or similar organization for the public school; or

(c) the principal of the public school,

requests, by a petition in writing to the school board, that a school advisory council be established for the school.

**(2)** A school board may establish one school advisory council for more than one school where requested by the persons referred to in clause (1)(a) for each school.

**(3)** Upon the establishment of a school advisory council for a school pursuant to subsection (1),

(a) subject to Section 21, the initial composition of the school advisory council shall be determined in the manner prescribed by the Minister; and

(b) the school advisory council, the school board and the Minister shall enter into an agreement setting out, subject to this Act, the composition and responsibilities of the school advisory council pursuant to Section 22 and additional advisory duties, if any.

**(4)** The school advisory council, the school board and the Minister may, from time to time, amend the agreement made pursuant to subsection (3).

**(5)** A school advisory council established pursuant to the former Act is continued in accordance with this Act and, for the purpose of this Act, is deemed to be established pursuant to this Act. 1995-96, c. 1, s. 20.

**21 (1)** A school advisory council for a public school shall have at least five and not more than eighteen members consisting of

(a) at least one parent of a child attending the school, elected by the parents of the children attending the school;

(b) where the school is a school with students in grade seven or a higher grade, at least two students attending the school, elected by the students attending the school;

(c) where the school is an elementary school, at least two students attending the school if the agreement made pursuant to subsection 20(3) so provides, elected by the students;

* Nova Scotia, Department of Education, *The Education Act and Regulations under the Education Act, Consolidated* September 2002 (Halifax: The Department, 2002)

(d) at least one person from the teachers employed at the school, elected by the teachers, and at least one person from the support staff employed at the school, elected by the support staff;

(e) the principal of the school; and

(f) at least one representative of the community in which the school is situated, appointed by the school advisory council or, where the school advisory council so determines, elected by the community.

**(2)** Unless the agreement made pursuant to subsection 20(3) otherwise provides, a school advisory council shall not have more than one third of its members from any of the clauses referred to in subsection (1).

**(3)** A person shall not be a member of a school advisory council and a member of a school board for the school district or school region in which the school is situate.

**(4)** A principal is a non-voting member of a school advisory council unless the agreement otherwise provides.

**(5)** A vacancy on a school advisory council does not impair the authority of the remaining members to act. 1995-96, c. 1, s. 21.

**22** A school advisory council for a public school shall

(a) after consultation with the staff of the school, develop and recommend to the school board a school improvement plan;

(b) prepare an annual report in such form and containing such information as the Minister determines;

(c) advise on the development of school policies that promote academic excellence and a positive learning environment;

(d) advise the principal and staff of the school on curriculum and programs, school practices, student discipline, fund-raising and parent-school communication and similar matters;

(e) advise the school board on curriculum and programs, student-support services, policy development, funding, communication strategies and similar matters;

(f) participate in the selection of the principal of the school by representation on the school board's selection committee;

(g) subject to the approval of the school board, make by-laws respecting the election of its members, the conduct of its meetings and the operation of the school advisory council; and

(h) perform such other duties and have such powers of the school board as the agreement made pursuant to subsection 20(3) provides and the Governor in Council transfers to the school advisory council pursuant to Section 23. 1995-96, c. 1, s. 22.

**23** **(1)** The Governor in Council, on the recommendation of the Minister and in accordance with an agreement made pursuant to Section 20, may transfer duties and powers of a school board to a school advisory council for a public school and, upon such transfer, the school board ceases to have those powers and duties with respect to that school and those powers and duties are powers and duties of the school advisory council.

**(2)** Notwithstanding subsection (1), the power to hire, suspend, dismiss or discipline an employee of a school board shall not be transferred to a school advisory council. 1995-96, c. 1, s. 23.

**PRINCIPALS**

**38** (k) encourage teachers and other staff of the school, students and parents to participate in school decision-making through representation on school advisory councils and committees;

(m) assist the school advisory council in the development of school improvement plans and, upon approval by the school board, co-ordinate their implementation;

(n) assist the school advisory council in the preparation of its annual report;

(p) account to the school board, through the superintendent, for the performance of the school;

**GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND POWERS OF SCHOOL BOARDS**

**64** **(2)** A school board shall, in accordance with this Act and the regulations,

(w) enter into an agreement, with a school advisory council and the Minister, determining the composition and responsibilities of the school advisory council;

(x) encourage the development of school advisory councils within its school district or school region;

(y) provide leadership training for members of school advisory councils;

(z) approve school-improvement plans and the annual report submitted by the school advisory council;

(aa) consult with school advisory councils with respect to matters assigned to school advisory councils pursuant to this Act;

NOVA SCOTIA
Department of Education